

Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni eds., *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008)

It has become increasingly difficult to find an academic publisher for collections of essays on the work of a single author, particularly within Australia, so Cambridge Scholars Publishing is to be congratulated on its publication of this book. As its editors, Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni, suggest in their Preface, it is particularly appropriate and timely that such a collection be published on the work of Thea Astley whose death in 2004 prompted some re-evaluation of her place within Australian literary history. This collection contains – in addition to the editors' Preface and Introduction – twelve previously-published essays on Astley's work; three new essays including one by her fellow-novelist Kate Grenville; three previously-published pieces by Astley herself on her writing, and one republished interview with Ray Willbanks. As such, it is particularly useful for any student of Astley's work, a handy reference despite the availability of most of these essays by electronic access. The extensive Bibliography is a welcome additional resource.

Astley has never been an easy writer to pin down, and this collection provides a wide-ranging set of responses to her work, from 1967 to the present. While some of these essays have weathered the effects of time better than others, it is always interesting to trace the critical reception of a writer across decades as well as the changing nature of criticism itself. The essays range from the largely thematic focus of the early critical pieces to the more recent ones, clearly informed by post-structuralist, feminist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives. The most successful of these grapple with Astley's ironic and parodic style and take into account the complexities of her work. As writer Mandy Sayer, who regarded Astley as her 'literary grandmother' suggests (in an article not included in this collection), Astley's prose is 'at once poetic, quirky and literary. She is not an "easy read"'.¹ A number of the essays in the collection echo Sayer's assessment, as evidenced in the questions posed in Debra Adelaide's piece, which tries to account for Astley's notorious neglect by the critics: 'How, then, do we read Astley's fictions? And will reading her always be a difficulty and demanding experience?' (138).

It is, I think, by turning to some of the most recent essays in the collection that these questions can best be addressed in a contemporary critical context that engages with current (postcolonial) questions of national identity, belonging and historical memory.

An example of this more nuanced contemporary approach is evident in the critical responses to the theme of violence that runs through Astley's work. Identified by Elizabeth Perkins in her 1993 article on Astley which appears in this collection as Chapter Eleven, this theme is taken up again in Susan Sheridan's chapter. Perkins suggests that violence in Astley's work is deliberately 'clichéd' in order to indicate that

¹ Mandy Sayer, 'Thea Astley comes out of the Shadows', *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend*, Sept. 28 1996: 17-21: 19

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'violence is clichéd behaviour' and to emphasise its physical and emotional impact, and Sheridan extends this idea in her analysis of Astley's last novel, *Drylands* (2000). She reads the novel as comprising particularly gendered 'tales of violence' that are 'hard to stomach' (168), picking up Leigh Dale's earlier phrase, 'linguistic and physical violence' (and Dale's essay is conveniently included in the collection) in order to evaluate the novel's bleak textual and representational violence. In underlining the notions of complicity, irony and focalization through the novel's narrator, Sheridan provides a useful analysis of the ways in which this complex 'late' text seems to bring its writer (as well as its writer/narrator) 'to the brink of despair' (175). Using Linda Hutcheon's work on irony and its affect/effect, Sheridan rightly draws attention back to the often-uncomfortable process of reading that is so integral to Astley's fiction. It would also be useful to read this novel that is subtitled 'a book for the world's last reader' as a 'late work' in the sense of Edward Said's idea of 'late style'² which, appropriately for this text, reads the 'last works' of famous writers, composers and thinkers as marked by irony, death and intransigence, and, significantly, by a refusal to resolve contradiction and difficulty.

Astley's refusal to offer her readers (or critics for that matter) any easy answers and her awareness of the pervasive nature of complicity (including her own) especially in the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia partly explains the sense of readerly discomfort referred to by so many of the critics in this volume. For Kate Grenville, whose essay is the final one in the collection, it is Astley's 'unerring bullshit detector' (176) and her willingness to uncover the 'unspoken' aspects of Australian history that mark Astley's legacy of 'shap[ing] our idea of ourselves' (176). Like Grenville's own historical fictions, it is this postcolonial rewriting of the silences of 'official' history that she sees as marking Astley's 'ironic, oblique voice of fiction', particularly in relation to black/white relations.

Astley's own commentary on her writing, in the three essays and the interview reprinted in this collection, provides a further perspective for reading her 'fictional worlds'. While her characteristic self-deprecation prevents her from making a fair assessment of her own work in the first two pieces, when she writes more generally about 'being a Queenslander', and about other writers, she does provide some useful hints about her own writerly approach. For example, in discussing Queensland, she writes: 'It's all in the antitheses. The contrasts. The contradictions ... And the distance' (18-19); and, later, she suggests that Queensland is 'where the tall yarn happens, acted out on a stage where, despite its vastness, the oddballs see and recognize each other across the no-miles and wave their understanding' (19). Perhaps, despite her reluctance to provide commentary on her own work, these words contain some important clues to the questions raised in this collection about how to read it – perhaps it is, after all, as Astley indicates here, a question of unresolved ambiguity, of story-telling oddballs and misfits and readers being

² Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

asked to 'wave their understanding' despite the prevailing darkness of tone and theme. In bringing together all these ideas in one volume, its editors have provided a useful and productive way of addressing the questions.

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